

ON THE EVOLUTION OF A COLLABORATION: A Case Study

By Ivan H. Scheier

I. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This year, you may have received even more catalogs than usual. One or two of them might have come from a national distribution center for volunteer leadership publications called "Volunteer Readership". This distribution center is intended to provide one place where you can find a large collection of such publications, however scattered their origins. It is an integrated operation of two distinct national organizations: the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA) and the National Information Center on Volunteerism (NICOV).

Hopefully, this article will not come across as a commercial for the distribution center. You will be receiving your catalog under separate cover--five or six of them

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if the computer misfires again. *Here, I simply want to describe the history, planning and implementation of this operation, as a reasonably successful instance of collaboration between two national organizations. From this description, I will then draw inferences about how and why it worked. I hope these guideline hypotheses will be useful for others exploring national collaboration. I believe they also have local applications.*

The strength of this is in sticking fairly close to the real-life evolution of a collaboration. A weakness may be over-reliance on this one instance. Here I can only suggest that NICOV and I have wider experience of collaborative successes and failures. The successes include several years of joint project operations with the Florida Office of Volunteerism. They also include cosponsorship of conferences with AAVS, AVAS, the Junior League, several state offices of volunteerism, and local Voluntary Action Centers. (Collaboration can and should cut across local, state and national lines.)

In fact, NCVA/NICOV collaborative experiments did begin as early as this time period. Many of them were relatively short-term, with pullback options. For example, joint proposal development on Alliance Task Forces and elsewhere; a member of one organization serving on the Board of the other; NICOV participation with NCVA in Voluntary Action Leadership; increasingly regular cooperation between our two information systems, etc. Between 1974 and 1978, I can list 17 instances of this sort. Some of them required more than casual, temporary commitment to one another. An example was the 1974-75 project to plan a national information system for volunteerism. Funded by ACTION, it was staffed jointly by NCVA and NICOV. The report tended to polarize response and became quite controversial. Many of the comments and criticisms were positive and helpful. But the total complexion of the controversy left some scars. Thus our first intensive joint venture was weighted towards disappointment. There was much in the experience that could have prompted a "never again together" response. Actually, I think it had the opposite effect. As we believed in what we had produced, bonds were cemented in common defense of the work rather than severed in recrimination.

I am not necessarily recommending shared suffering as a deliberate collaborative principle. (For one thing, it's hard to facilitate self-consciously.) But I do think it can be a factor, if not too overwhelming, for organizations which share a substantial body of common experience. They must also be willing openly to share their hurts and problems with one another, or at least resist projecting false-positive images at each other. This may be more exhortation than deliberate principle. In any event, I think it has diagnostic validity; there's a chance you're going to make it when you can say openly to each other: "Hey, we've got problems; there's some things we can't do, without your help". I'm inclined to believe openly conceded "can't do's" facilitate a collaboration as much as the "can do's". Probably a good mix is best, well-seasoned with objectivity on both sides.

In any case, I think the joint information planning controversy inadvertently helped NICOV and NCVA over the "shiny image" problem. Once over that hurdle, we have had ample opportunity openly to share common problems over recent years because we have been in a somewhat similar position as national organizations. So much for the common complaint factor, otherwise known as the paranoia principle. Organizations that cry together can work together provided they are crying about the same sorts of things, and not crying all the time.

NCVA/NICOV interaction was not all peaches and cream in the early overlap years. In some instances, NCVA people may have perceived NICOV as aggressing into areas of work and constituency traditionally handled by NCVA. NICOV did not see it that way, but I came to appreciate the restraint and dignity of the NCVA response. There were sometimes hurt feelings too, as individual staff members of one organization began interacting with staff of the other. "They don't understand or appreciate us" is not easy to work out at the 2,000 mile range. In one case I know of, we bid against each other on a significant contract. Nowadays we usually bid jointly on these kinds of contracts and were just awarded our first one.

Today, I'm able to take a Pollyanna view on this part of our history. We had just enough conflict and competitive experience to realize the misery of it all. And where we didn't cooperate, we at least tried to stay out of each other's yard. This was easy enough; volunteer leadership is a very big yard.

A very significant event occurred during 1976, when two able young Executive Directors assumed the reins of leadership. Kenn Allen at NCVA; Dorothy Denny at NICOV. They carried forward from their Associate Director days, and perfected further an admirably candid, task-oriented, continuous dialogue on the concerns of the two organizations in relation to the people we serve. Gradually, they extended this dialogue to others on staff and board.

As an outside admirer, I also know something about AAVS/AVAS/AVB's joint sponsorship of a national conference and their joint publication of Volunteer Administration.

Such instances are secondary background here, to this extent: I happen to know of nothing in them which seriously violates the conclusions drawn from the NCVA/NICOV case study examined here. I do believe all the instances described share several general characteristics with the NCVA/NICOV distribution center example: a relatively small set of participants, with common interest in a project difficult for any one of them to accomplish effectively (or as effectively) alone; and usually some prior "test experience" working together.

Hopefully this article will stimulate dialogue on these examples, other examples, and counter-examples. I chose the distribution center simply because I happen to know it well, but not too well. As a NICOV staff person, I was regularly consulted on developments, but I was never one of the primary decision-makers in the process. I hope this, and my admiration for similar examples not involving NICOV or NCVA, suggests some modicum of objectivity on my part. Further to reinforce that view, I do not claim the NICOV/NCVA example is one of serene perfection. It was hammered out; it was difficult and it is still incomplete in some respects. NCVA and NICOV remain strugglers and learners in this collaboration thing, and I hope that sense comes through here. The danger is making it all seem too elegant and logical, when trying to summarize the complexities of a real-life collaboration. If it turns out that way, don't blame anyone else. I take total personal responsibility for what's written here. It's not official from NICOV, NCVA, or anyone else.

II. HISTORY OF A COLLABORATION

I doubt if good collaboration grows out of thin air, or hot air either. Some pre-history in which the organizations reality-

test each other is desirable, maybe necessary. During this testing, trust builds. Conflict or the threat of conflict may also build to the point where it is unendurable and must be resolved. Both these things can happen concurrently. But I do think the mutually interactive history of organizations is relevant in analyzing their potential for collaboration. The NCVA/NICOV distribution center collaboration began to mature in early 1977. Much had happened before.

1967-1973

The two organizations are relatively old as things go in the volunteer resource field. They are each approximately 10 years old.

Early on, there was virtually no significant overlap between them - in origin, mission, or function. NCVA, conceptualized at the highest levels of government, progressively worked its way towards grass roots responsiveness. NICOV began as a local volunteer program and worked its way towards generalizing of volunteer program principles and models. NCVA was always generic. NICOV began with \$500, a post office box, and a lot of nerve. NCVA had a far more heroic problem. Out of principle, it voluntarily sought to decrease its dependence on substantial federal funding. This was a painful and courageous epic, the significance of which will grow with the years. But in those early years there was little potential for either conflict or cooperation between two quite different organizations.

1973-1977

By 1973-1974, NCVA and NICOV had begun to overlap significantly in mission and services, (though there were always some discrete functions in each organization, and still are). I like to think this overlap occurred because we were both trying to be responsive to volunteer leadership needs, essentially the same everywhere. In any case, the potential for conflict vs. cooperation was there; it was getting difficult to pretend the other did not exist.

Another bit of history may be relevant. For the past four years or so, the two organizations have been approximately comparable in size. Also recently, in time for distribution center planning, the two organizations have achieved relatively healthy and stable states. Both NICOV and NCVA have had their ups and downs over the years. NCVA suffered epic agonies breaking away from its early dependence on federal dollars. At one time in the late 1960's, NICOV had sixteen staff members; dropped way below that in the early seventies, and never reached that size again until the mid-seventies. We also understand financial crisis.

By 1977, however, each organization had strengthened and stabilized to the extent that they could look ahead a reasonable length of time. As a consequence, they did not approach collaborative negotiations in desperation with judgment clouded by urgent organizational hungers.

Thus far I can discern the following background factors favorable for the distribution center collaboration:

1. Similarity of organizational characteristics.

a. A significant degree of organizational similarity in mission, functions, and constituency, so that the two organizations tended to help and hurt in similar ways. This doesn't mean identity; a reasonable proportion of different but complementary functions may also have helped.

b. Other things being equal, at least approximate comparability in size is probably a favorable factor. A larger organization might be tempted to lean on much smaller ones rather than negotiate objectively.

c. The organizations are in a reasonably healthy state, undistracted by sheer survival concerns. Please note: this does not mean a rich and euphoric state either. That is unrealistic and could be complacently counter-productive to collaboration.

2. Test experience together.

a. Enough real-life testing experience with one another, so the organizations have seen each other close up, warts and all - and some beauty marks, too. It's good when people stop kidding each other about what their organization really can or cannot do. I have always believed collaborations have much more chance of success when based on open-eyed evaluated capability of the participating organizations. This can come from experiences working together, from development and sharing of organizational effectiveness data, or, better, both of these. It doesn't come from poetic capability statements.

b. It is probably also helpful, or at least not harmful, if the participating organizations have experienced some conflict or competition or the clear threat of same, as long as this does not overwhelm more promising feedback in their experience together.

c. Similarly, a reasonable amount of shared pain and struggle, can be a good thing. Thoroughgoing collective masochism is not recommended.

3. At least one open, honest and regular communication channel between top management in each organization.

4. It takes two to collaborate. I'm not sure it takes ten. I believe the small size of the collaborating set was a favorable factor in NICOV/NCVA cooperative ventures. One-to-one collaboration can get complicated enough. When three, four, five or more try to get it together, there are advantages to be sure. Among them are breadth of input and wider scope of constituency and capability possible for productive combination. But the level of complexity can quickly become insupportable. So can the level of attenuation. I remember an extreme example, consulting with a group of 200 agencies in a community, all serving a generally similar kind

of client. The worthy goal was collaboration; the practical common denominator on which they could simultaneously agree for purposes of common action was little more than the time of day. *I say get it together for a small set first; then build as appropriate.*

Other favorable factors are identified as the description proceeds. In no case is it claimed that all factors must be present for a successful collaboration, that any single one of them is essential, or that other factors cannot be effective in other collaborative models.

III.A NATIONAL DISTRIBUTION CENTER: EARLY 1977

From initiation to implementation, Dorothy Denny of NICOV and Kenn Allen of NCVA were the leading communicators and negotiators. In both organizations, there was some pre-existing "wouldn't it be nice" feeling about a national publications distribution center for volunteer leadership books and pamphlets. The general concept was: would such a distribution center benefit the field? NCVA had strong field experience represented on its board and a highly credible track record in the publications and information field. NICOV drew from an annual survey of its clients, plus several years' previous experience with a prototype operation including publications authored by NICOV and others.

This relatively organized body of information and experience tended to confirm field's need for the service. Beyond that, there was a less organized, yet powerful impressionistic basis. It just seemed to be one of those gaps we were confronted with daily by phone, letter, at workshops, etc., much like the need for further penetration of the educational system with volunteer leadership skill-building and concerns, or the old one about staff support of volunteers.

Therefore, on the field benefit questions, the decision was yes. We did not feel further special needs assessment,

feasibility studies, or research was necessary to support that practical judgment. There are significant advantages to special assessment studies backgrounding collaborative enterprises. Among them are better documentation of need or the surprise of discovering your impressionistic needs assessment was seriously in error. The main disadvantages include the additional time and expense taken up on special feasibility and evaluative studies. On balance, we thought the field better served in this case by reliance on practical judgment, relevant experience and precedent, and prompt response.

Concurrent with the field benefit question was the capability question: could and should NCVA/NICOV do the job? There are a transitional set of assumptions between the more ethically-conditioned field benefit question and the more expedient capability one. They go something like this:

National organizations, and any coalition of national organizations, are justified only as they serve their publics; in this case, the volunteer leadership and volunteer public.

Improved collaboration and cooperative action is a major way in which national volunteer organizations can serve their publics better. This includes avoidance of duplication and alertness to any facet of functioning which is more effectively served in combination rather than in competition.

The second statement begins to synthesize the capability and field benefit issues, and practicality with pure ethics. I do not believe resource organizations are obliged to commit suicide attempting to meet field needs, real as these needs may be. It is healthy and realistic for them to ask: can we indeed meet this particular need effectively and still survive? If the answer is no, they should try to persuade capable others to undertake the task.

The capability question for NICOV/NCVA broke out in two parts: Could the two of us do it effectively by ourselves (and survive). If the answer to that was "yes", should we still involve other organizations for other reasons?

Our answer to the first question was "yes", based on our judgment of the prototype experience and capability of each organization, as previously indicated in this paper. Beyond that, the decision was that both of us together could do the job far better than either of us alone: a vital factor in the decision to collaborate. NICOV had been conducting a prototype national distribution center operation for several years. We simply never had the muscle to make it work by ourselves, at a satisfactory level of volume, range of publications offered, etc. NCVA later had a chance to try solo with greater resources than NICOV had. To my profound admiration, they opted to negotiate collaboration with NICOV instead. The practical part of that decision for NCVA might have been tapping into NICOV's experience in the catalog process, though NCVA also had plenty of this.

There were factors on the other side, too. For example, loss of solo identity and glory for each of us alone. But this was more than offset by the good vibes we anticipated as a team, through providing an immediately needed field service. For both of us, there were also added attractions in an operation which promised to be largely self-sufficient financially, with side benefits in wider dissemination of our own materials and services along with those of others.

Throughout, practical factors strongly influenced our decision on whether we could effectively respond to the more ethically-conditioned appreciation of field needs. I emphasize the integration of the practical and the pious in such matters. I tend to be suspicious of collaborative plans presented as if they are purely altruistic and self-sacrificing.

But the decision--we could do it together--was far from purely self-advantageous. Our planning correctly anticipated serious risk factors. For example, many thousands of scarce dollars and person hours had to be invested front-end before the first book was sold, and serious operating deficits were realistically expected long after. Both NCVA and NICOV had many other places to put those person-hours and dollars. And if the venture failed, they would suffer this loss, not anyone else. I want to emphasize this: scraping together the necessary dollars and time was a tough and somewhat dangerous proposition; what we decided to risk were our own resources of time, expertise and money.

At the time, I was pretty uneasy about this. Looking back, I'm happier, and would even elevate it to the status of principle, namely, the "grunt and groan" principle of collaboration. Other things being equal, it is healthier for participants significantly to risk their own, rather than the gifted resources of anyone else. The reason: you have to be very serious about trusting your judgment, and in testing commitment to each other and to the project. I believe the same principle might apply to any risk of resources, of whatever size, provided it is a significant one relative to the total available resources of the collaborators. To paraphrase Dr. Johnson: "Nothing clears an organization's head so wonderfully as the knowledge that it might be hanged in the morning".

The remaining question was: should others also be involved, or involved instead of us? We considered and discarded the idea of approaching a commercial publishing house. There were certainly advantages, but we felt they were outweighed by the advantages of our inside knowledge of volunteer leadership and our willingness to take more risks on behalf of our field.

We might still have approached other non-profit organizations within the field. We did not do so individually, for the reasons previously described: the advantages of a trim small set with prototype

experience, already tested experience working intensively together, etc. Nevertheless, some discussions were held with the Alliance for Volunteerism, at that time a coalition of some 15 volunteer resource and volunteer-using organizations, including NCVA and NICOV. The Alliance did contribute a small amount of planning money, in accordance with its mission of facilitating collaboration in the field.

A larger Alliance investment would probably have run athwart the issue of whether the Alliance should itself operate programs, as well as facilitating collaboration among others who operated programs. As I recall, this issue was not fully resolved in the Alliance at that time.

The decision, then, was to do it ourselves. The remaining question was: how soon? We saw no reason to delay, since our judgment was that the field needed the service now, and had needed it for some time. As noted previously, we decided not to invest further time and money in additional needs assessment or feasibility studies. As also noted previously, with only two organizations involved, the complexity of collaborative planning and gearing up was much reduced. The first catalog was prepared and mailed, and the first publications moved out of the joint distribution center less than six months after the first serious collaborative discussions began.

Continuing the earlier numbering series, the principal additional conclusions I draw from this section, are that the following factors are advantageous to collaboration:

5. *There should be clear benefit to the field, consistent with the realistically assessed ability of the collaborating organizations to provide these services without suicide.*
6. *A realistic appreciation that the collaborating organizations can do it better together than alone, or cannot do it effectively at all solo. These positive factors must distinctly outweigh negative factors such as loss of individual organizational identity.*

7. *The organizations are willing seriously to risk their own resources in the collaborative venture. More generally, they show a readiness to take responsibility for the consequences of their own decisions.*

Once again, this section illustrated the trimness of decision-making and movement made possible by a relatively small set of collaborating organizations (principle #4).

IV. A "HISTORY" OF THE FUTURE

As this is written, the joint distribution center had just passed its first birthday. Volume of sales confirms our initial judgment that the service was needed. So do comments from the field. We have also recovered a significant fraction of our original investment, and the ongoing operation is nearly paying for itself.

I suppose a final guideline conclusion might be:

8. *One good collaboration deserves another; at the very least, it should not prevent others.*

The cautionary part of this is that NICOV/NCVA's positive experience with each other should not deter their pursuit of collaborative enterprises with other organizations and people. Both organizations continue to do so, though we keep in touch with one another about these. That kind of enhanced communication is one example of the momentum carrying forward from the joint distribution center experience.

Further, our two Executive Directors are currently applying similar collaborative principles to the consolidation of our leadership development and training activities. Our first major joint training effort is scheduled for autumn, 1978. Also, in autumn, NCVA will make a substantial contribution of documents to NICOV's archival library, in return for ready information access to that library. And I will be spending a month at NCVA, hopefully helping to establish a staff exchange pattern.

Beginning in 1977, our ongoing practical experience in collaboration began to be explicitly identified, ratified and extended by both our boards. This is vitally important and may be another principle in itself.

9. *Positive collaborative experiences should be clearly identified, analyzed, ratified, encouraged, and incorporated in the policy direction of the participating organizations.*

The NCVA and NICOV boards have certainly made their contribution to collaborative momentum in this way.

In December, 1977, the NCVA Executive Committee, on recommendation of its Committee on the Future, unanimously adopted the following resolution which was then communicated formally to NICOV:

Recognizing the history of cooperation between NCVA and the National Information Center on Volunteerism and further, the potential for future collaboration, NCVA extends to NICOV an invitation to undertake exploratory discussion concerning the nature of this potential collaboration, to seek closer formal ties between the two organizations and to develop a clear statement of our compatibility.

In January, 1978, the NICOV Board of Directors reviewed the NCVA resolution and unanimously passed its own resolution:

The National Information Center on Volunteerism wishes to thank the National Center for Voluntary Action for its invitation to undertake exploratory discussions concerning potential future collaboration. The Board endorses establishment of a Board-Staff committee at NICOV which will have responsibility for discussions and exchange of idea papers, etc., with NCVA.

The explorations encouraged by both Boards produced, within six months, significant further collaborative plans for review by the respective boards. Consequent to this, during the week beginning July 17, 1978,

the NCVA Executive Committee and the NICOV Board unanimously passed identical resolutions which said, in part:

Organizations committed to fulfillment of the goals of service and leadership must set aside historic barriers and territorial considerations and mutually seek new ways to share capabilities and resources.

NCVA and NICOV have a unique opportunity to join together common commitment, compatible programs and complementary capabilities to strengthen their leadership in the volunteer community and to ensure their continued vitality.

It is, therefore, the mutual intent of the National Information Center on Volunteerism and the National Center for Voluntary Action to promptly and seriously plan to merge into a single organization.